

Holidays and Mental Health: Make It A Priority

When most people think of the holidays they envision families gathering, food, drinks, parties and laughter. However, for a significant number of people holidays bring about loneliness, stress, anxiety, depression and fear.

Many older adults may have had friends die and loved ones may not be able to visit due to work, travel distances or family obligations. A lack of social interaction can lead to loneliness and poor mental health.

Stress and anxiety can be even higher during the holidays for people of all ages. Dealing with difficult family members, budgeting for and buying gifts, cooking, and party invitations or lack thereof can raise a person's level of anxiety and stress.

People suffering from substance use disorders or people in recovery may experience increased levels of fear along with their stress and anxiety. The fear of being invited to or being in situations that may tempt them to misuse substances or to relapse while in recovery is real.

Children, teens and adults of all ages are also susceptible to depression during the holidays. Children and teens of split families may feel guilty about being with one parent over the other. Adults can have similar feelings if a relationship has not gone as planned. Not being able to afford gifts for family or friends can cause feelings of guilt and depression. Not being able to live up to yours or others' expectations is often a concern for people around the holidays.

So, what can we do to help ourselves and those we love to have happier holidays?

When we are not able to be physically close to ones we care about, technology can help. Although not a perfect substitute, setting up online gatherings can provide elderly people and families a chance to engage socially with one another. You can also volunteer at nursing homes, charities and senior centers to brighten someone's day.

Accept that things won't always go as planned. You're probably not going to have the perfect dinner. Something will burn or spill or break. Remind yourself that those small things are okay and may provide a happy memory in the future. Gifts are nice but reminding yourself that experiences last a lot longer than gifts can help when you aren't able to get everyone everything they want. And remember it is okay to say no if your calendar gets jammed with competing obligations.

It takes a community to help those suffering from substance use disorders and to keep those in recovery on task. Be aware if someone is in recovery or has a substance use disorder when planning a gathering. Don't make alcohol a focal point of the event and ask guests not to use drugs while in attendance. You could even make your party a sober party and not have any alcohol or other drugs allowed.

Remind yourself that you can't make everyone happy. Control what you can control and make time for self-care. If you find yourself struggling over the holidays reach out to someone you trust or contact New York Project Hope. Call or text 988 or chat at 988lifeline.org.

Wishing you and your family a healthy and happy holiday season.

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